

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**July 3, 2022**

**1 Chronicles 29:10-13    Revelation 21:1-7**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us; silence in us any voice but your own and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We continue this week with our short sermon series on the various names, metaphors, and images of God in scripture. We have talked about God as Potter, God as refuge, fortress, or rock, and today we look at God as sovereign or King.

Our first reading comes from the book of 1 Chronicles. Chronicles is a telling of the Kings of Israel. The setting for this reading is a celebration – it marks the transition from the first king of Israel, David, to his successor king Solomon. David was the king that united the 12 tribes of Israel into one nation. Solomon would go on to build the temple. Listen for a word from God.

**1 Chronicles**

*Then David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly;  
David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of our ancestor Israel,  
forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, are the greatness, the power, the  
glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on  
the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted  
as head above all. Riches and honor come from you, and you rule over  
all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make*

*great and to give strength to all. And now, our God, we give thanks to you and praise your glorious name.*

Our next reading comes from the New Testament book of Revelation. It is not a book that Presbyterians read from often (in fact, it is the only book of the bible that John Calvin, the reformer who helped start Presbyterianism, did not write a commentary for) – it is filled with wild and extravagant imagery with visions of the end of the world as we know it and the establishment of God’s final kingdom. It is interpreted in a variety of ways, which adds to the confusion of how to understand the book. Chapter 21, which is where our reading comes from, describes the beginning of God’s kingdom on earth – a new creation.

### **Revelation**

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God; they will be God’s peoples, and God will be with them; God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also it was said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then it was said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.*

The image of king is not one we think about often – because we don't live under monarchies. In fact, this weekend, we celebrate as a country our independence from the rule of a king. But a core theological belief of the Presbyterian Church is one that upholds the sovereignty of God. Or in other words, the kingship of God, or God as king. The sovereignty of God means that God is the author of all creation. Or, to put it simply – God is in charge of everything because God created everything. Therefore, recognizing God's sovereignty means God is to be loved, worshiped, and praised.

Sometimes people think that God's sovereignty means that God gets to do whatever God wants, so we need to watch our step. There is a Far Side cartoon by Gary Larsen that depicts God looking at a computer screen, where a man is standing underneath a piano that is hoisted above his head. God's finger hovers over a button on the computer keyboard labeled "smite." Presbyterian or "Reformed theology holds, by contrast to this way of thinking, that the sovereign God always acts consistently with who God is. Karl Barth called this "the divine freedom," arguing that God never exercises God's power in ways that contradict the truth that God is love."

The sovereignty of God also thinks about God's power and the relationship of that power to what God has created. Like the power dynamic between a king and his subjects. The Presbyterian tradition holds that while God is sovereign or king, and God is all powerful, it does not mean that God holds all the power, and we have none. Rather we understand that God shares power with us. God enters into humanity and powerlessness in the person of Jesus. In this way, we share in the power of God.

1 Chronicles shows some of that shared power. In the ceremony and in the transition from one earthly king to another, David spends time leading the gathered community in worship – to praise God as the ultimate king. Putting the earthly king in the proper perspective and relationship with God as creator and sovereign of all. The passage in Revelation also shows a powerful king among the people. It harkens back to the beginning with God walking around in the Garden of Eden. The vision in Revelation has a king establishing a new city, and in that city God and humanity together will dwell.

This understanding of power that is shared between God and humanity, however, can be concerning when it is misunderstood or misconstrued. Faith and public life in this country has always been intertwined, but there have been different understandings of how those should interact with one another.

We are no longer under the rule of a king, and when this country was founded, as part of the constitution, religious liberty, or freedom of religion was codified and enshrined into law. The First Amendment protects religious freedom in two interconnected and necessary ways—by preventing government establishment of religion and by protecting the free exercise of religion from unnecessary government interference.

When we talk about separation of church and state, it is these two ways we are talking about. That the government will not establish a national religion that everyone must follow, and that we, as citizens, are free to practice (or not) the religion of our choice. These two things, however, do not mean that people of faith are separated from the government.

As Presbyterians, grounded in the Reformed tradition – a tradition of protest (hence the name Protestant) – we live in tension with our faith and with the civil government. We practice this tension as we seek to be good citizens, following the laws of this country, at the same time we

may give a critical evaluation of those same laws. I feel fortunate to live in this country, I actively participate in civil society, and at the same time we do not think uncritically about the country. We do not put our faith aside because we are citizens. It is our faith, and the call to recognize the belovedness of all that calls us to challenge any laws that are unjust. It is our faith that calls us to “work in the public realm and to cross over political, social, economic, and religious boundaries in order to discern and foster the common good for all people in this nation and the world. Christians are called both to support the government of the United States insofar as it serves this beneficent goal and to work diligently for reforms wherever and whenever it does not. We are called to give thanks for the gifts God has channeled to us through this nation and to confess our complicity in this nation’s moral failings.”

We do not put our faith aside when we also think about being citizens and Christian. But, because we are citizens of this country with its foundation in religious liberty, “it does mean that we have not only felt free to challenge those in authority but also have resisted efforts to impose the beliefs of any particular religion, including our own, upon the whole of society through the use of governmental authority.”

However, there is a threat by some who hold a different understanding of religious liberty, and that threat is Christian nationalism, or more specifically White Christian Nationalism. If you watched the events of the insurrection on January 6, or if you have seen some of the recent public hearings about those events, perhaps, like me, you were disturbed when you saw Christian symbols being used that day as people violently attack police officers and the Capitol building. Alongside the confederate flag, white supremacy symbols, and Nazi symbols were crosses, and people carrying bibles, and signs that read Jesus saves. Prayers prior to the attacks were given that seemed to indicate God sanctioned the violence that was to come.

The National Council of Churches has articulated the threat of Christian Nationalism. They write, “Christian nationalists claim a dedication to a ‘biblical worldview,’ but their understanding of that worldview is in multiple ways contrary to the actual witness of the Bible. Where the Bible has at its core the story of a people committed to welcoming aliens and strangers because they themselves were aliens and strangers, and to defending the oppressed because they themselves were once oppressed, the Christian nationalist narrative rejects the stranger and judges the oppressed as deserving of their oppression. Where the Bible declares that all human beings are made in the image of God, American Christian nationalists regard only certain people — “advanced,” white, Christian, English-speaking — to have the full measure of God’s image. Where the Great Commandment (Mt, 22: 35-40 and parallels) enjoins us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves, Christian nationalists choose to narrow who is considered an American, to love only certain neighbors, and to regard others as enemies to be defeated, deported, or destroyed. Where Christ affirmed that “my kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36), Christian nationalists have equated the Kingdom of God with their vision of America.”

They note that Christian nationalism is characterized by the following religious affirmations:

- that the United States was founded as a Christian nation;
- that America is exceptional. That is, God has given the United States particular blessings and privileges not available to people in other countries, and the nation must remain Christian in order for those blessings to continue;

- that only Christians are the proper custodians of this nation’s heritage;
- that Christianity (or a particular form of Christianity) should have privileged status in the United States, particularly in matters of law and political policy;
- that, even when their presence is tolerated, people who practice other religions or none cannot be fully American — they are not welcomed, their voices are discounted, and they are not to be trusted with political and cultural leadership;
- that Christians in general and some Christians, in particular, should enjoy a level of legal protection not granted to those who practice other religions; and,
- that Christians have been made to suffer unjustly, leaving them no alternative but to respond with revolutionary zeal to preserve the United States as a great Christian nation.

Christian Nationalism distorts both Christianity and America’s constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism often overlaps and provides cover for white supremacy and contributes to the misuse of “religious liberty as a rationale for circumventing laws and regulations aimed at protecting a pluralistic democracy, such as nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQI+ people, women, and religious minorities.”

Patriotism or being a good citizen is one thing, but Christian nationalism is something entirely different. As Christians, and particularly a community that is predominantly white Christians, we have a special responsibility and to understand and dismantle Christian nationalism. Christian Nationalism is the pursuit of tribal power, not the common good. Our God, our sovereign God, calls us toward the common good.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church in Galatia writes about our freedom in God, in living under the rule of God. The Message version captures this sentiment well, it reads, “It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom.” (Galatians 5:13-14, The Message)

Yes, we need to protect individual rights – but we do so in the framework of “We, the people...” There is a limit to individual rights, or there should be “when protecting one person’s freedom starts to infringe on another’s.”

While we may not fully resonate with the image of King any longer – we can understand power and responsibility. We can understand freedom and obligation. As Christians we are bound to our God by faith and not by citizenship. And yet we are also citizens of this democracy. Our patriotism does not mean we must diminish our faith or convictions. But we ought not diminish others either. That is not freedom.

As the National Council of Churches has stated, “Christians of good faith, dedicated to the good news of Jesus and to the principles of love, hope, and justice, bring a vision of inclusion, justice, peace, and unity to the table. Peoples of all creeds, kinds, and convictions can be part of the work of creating a just society — one that treasures the distinctiveness of each individual and the intrinsic value of all.”

May that be the marks of the kingdom of God. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> <https://equip.pcusa.org/mod/book/view.php?id=13899&chapterid=159>

<sup>1</sup> <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness-ncc/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches/>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/faith-and-patriotism/>

<sup>1</sup> <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness-ncc/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches/>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/christian-nationalism-is-single-biggest-threat-to-americas-religious-freedom/>

<sup>1</sup> Maggie Nelson, “On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint”